

Noriega Said to Be Part Of Guns-for-Drugs Deal

Charge Arises During Codefendants' Trial

By Michael Isikoff
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MIAMI, Feb. 27—Panamanian Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega personally authorized the shipment of 1,000 M-16 rifles to Colombia's Medellin drug cartel in exchange for cocaine that was to be distributed in this country, a federal prosecutor charged here today.

While his alleged partners were meeting at the Bank of Boston building in Panama City in 1986, Noriega told them over a speaker phone "they had his protection" for the guns-for-drugs deal and that he was to "receive a portion of the proceeds," Assistant U.S. Attorney Michael P. Sullivan told jurors here.

The new allegations of Noriega's drug dealing came during opening arguments in a case that is being billed as a preview of the long-delayed trial of Noriega, now scheduled for June 24. The cases of two codefendants, Miami real estate broker Brian Alden Davidow and Colombian businessman William Saldarriaga, have been severed from Noriega's, and they are being tried separately on charges of plotting with Noriega to smuggle more than 600 pounds of cocaine aboard a 46-foot pleasure yacht called the Krill.

Federal prosecutors have promised that the trial of Davidow and Saldarriaga will provide a "window" into their case against Noriega. The ill-fated voyage of the Krill, which was seized by Colombian authorities in March 1986, represents only one

portion of the 1988 indictment of Noriega on drug trafficking and conspiracy charges.

But it is also among the most sensational and tantalizing portions of the case, involving a cast of characters that includes high-level members of the Medellin cartel, leftist Colombian guerillas and two of Noriega's former associates, including the son of a former Panamanian presidential candidate, whose mutilated bodies were found outside the city of Medellin shortly after the Krill's voyage. Prosecutors have said in court papers that Saldarriaga has told fellow inmates in a federal prison here that Noriega ordered the murder of the two associates because he believed they had cheated him on the drug deal.

Defense lawyers, however, say the case provides them with a rare opportunity to look for weaknesses in the government's evidence. "You're going to hear a lot of people who have been given a lot of deals—sweet deals—because they can point their finger in the general direction of General Noriega," said Richard Sharpstein, a celebrated Miami defense lawyer who is representing Davidow and who has worked closely with the Noriega defense team.

As outlined by Sullivan, the story of the Krill began in early 1986. Cesar Rodriguez, a longtime Noriega associate and owner of an airplane leasing company, and Gen. Ruben Dario Paredes, a former commander of the Panamanian

army who had run unsuccessfully for president, plotted to use the boat to exchange the American-made M-16s for cocaine from the Medellin cartel, he said.

To help facilitate the deal, the two men allegedly arranged for the boat to contain secret compartments to hide its contraband. They also recruited a series of conspirators including Saldarriaga, who prosecutors have said in court papers was a Medellin cartel operative, and Davidow, who they charge was a major cocaine dealer in Miami brought in to ensure the drug's distribution in south Florida.

Also involved in the conspiracy, Sullivan said, was a "notorious drug trafficker" named Ramon Navarro; Ruben Paredes Jr., who was slain, and his brother Amet, sons of the general. Amet Paredes was also indicted in the case and recently pleaded guilty. Both Navarro and Amet Paredes are expected to testify in the trial.

Sullivan said that, with Noriega's protection, the Krill sailed through the Panama Canal and headed for Cartagena, Colombia. But, he said, it was seized by Colombian National Police on its return voyage "loaded to the gunnels with cocaine."

Sharpstein lashed into the government's case, saying it was cooked up "by the political enemies of Noriega" to settle a score over a power struggle in Panama. Noriega and Gen. Ruben Paredes were once allies, who had a falling out when Noriega took over the Panama Defense Forces in the early 1980s. They never would have been partners in the drug deal because "they hated each other . . . they were the Hatfields and McCoy's of Panama," he said.

Sharpstein said Davidow, 29, was working in the family real estate business at the time of the Krill incident and had nothing to do with Noriega or drug trafficking.